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New York City art/tech space Eyebeam hosted a Wikipedia edit-a-thon on Feb. 1. A similar event happens Feb. 9 in L.A.'s Chinatown.;
Credit: PHOTO BY MICHAEL MANDIBERG

WIKIPEDIA BECOMES A BATTLEGROUND FOR ART ACTIVISM



CATHERINE WAGLEY ([HTTPS://WWW.LAWEEKLY.COM/GUEST-AUTHOR/CATHERINE-WAGLEY/](https://www.laweekly.com/guest-author/catherine-wagley/)) ✕ FEBRUARY 6, 2014 ()



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Artist-philosopher Adrian Piper wants her Wikipedia page gone. She finds its portrayal of her inaccurate, and she has never cared to compromise about anything. Early in her career, following the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State protests, she pulled artwork from a show at New York Cultural Center, asking that it be replaced by a sign citing “the inability of art expression to have a meaningful existence under conditions other than those of peace, equality, truth, trust and freedom.”

Last summer, she sent an email to Wikimedia Foundation, which runs the massive, volunteer-edited encyclopedia, asking that her page be deleted.

Blueraspberry, an avid Wikipedia editor on the Volunteer Response Team, fielded the email and assumed from Piper's gender-ambiguous first name that she was male, though a quick Google search would have shown otherwise. “Piper states that this page 'falsely claims to offer biographical information' on him,” Blueraspberry wrote on the deletion-discussion page he created on Aug. 19, 2013. Two other editors voted to “delete.” The article made no “organized claims to [the artist's] notability,” one said. Editor freshacconci countered: “Adrian Piper is a major artist and is thus a public figure. It would be somewhat akin to Lady Gaga asking us to delete her article because she didn't like what was written.”

Editors eventually “blew up” the page and started from scratch, but the version that reappeared in December 2013 made more misleading claims, such as that Piper “was kicked out of the art world ... for her race and gender.” So the artist put up a “removed and reconstructed” version of the page on her own website, where it will stay until the Wikipedia page's factuality improves.

Revising Piper's entry is on the crowd-sourced to-do list for the 22 Art + Feminism edit-a-thons happening this month across North America, Europe and in Hong Kong.

Groups are convening to write about feminism-related movements and artists. L.A.'s event takes place Sunday, Feb. 9, at the Public School on Chung King Road.

Edit-a-thons held Feb. 1 and 2 created about 75 new pages, including one for “feminist aesthetics” and one for conceptual artist Mary Beth Edelson, whose *Some Living Women Artists/Last Supper* (1972) collaged female artists' faces over Christ's and the disciples'.

“The interface of Wikipedia can be intimidating to the uninitiated,” says Jacqueline Mabey, who works at Manhattan art & tech nonprofit Eyebeam, which hosted one of those events. In October, she was talking to her friend, Siân Evans of the Art Libraries Society of North America's Women and Art Special Interest Group, when Evans mentioned wanting to

do a feminism-focused edit sprint.

When Mabey mentioned the idea to her life partner, artist Michael Mandiberg, he said he'd been talking with curator Laurel Ptak about organizing the same sort of thing. So the four of them started inviting colleagues from all over to join the effort by holding their own meet-ups.

Mabey says, “[M]eeting in groups, in a welcoming environment, is a more realistic way to encourage the participation of women and women-identified” — demographics underrepresented among both Wikipedia editors and its entries.

“The biggest demographic [of Wikipedia editors] is young, overeducated white males in wealthy countries,” Wikimedia Foundation board chair Kat Walsh said last summer on consultant Mark Oppenheim's podcast, “which is great because they have a lot of capacity, but ... there's a lot of things mostly known by women or people in less wealthy countries that just isn't really well covered because the people who know about it ... either they aren't able [to write] or they aren't interested — and we're trying to figure out why.”

Early on in Wikipedia's 13-year history, founder Jimmy Wales would emphasize that a few hundred editors did most of the work; it made Wikipedia seem like a less shocking organization.

“But if you think about it, Wales' view of things is actually much more shocking,” blogged then-20-year-old Internet activist Aaron Swartz, whose suicide last year after being prosecuted for illegally downloading journal articles led to academics from almost every field posting research online. “[A]round 1,000 people wrote the world's largest encyclopedia in four years for free?” He found that number unfathomably small, given how big the world is.

Swartz wrote that in 2006, but it took a few more years for debates about diversity on Wikipedia to ramp up. In 2011, a voluntary survey showed 9 percent of editors to be women, prompting a *New York Times* article called “Define gender gap? Look up Wikipedia's contributor list,” and bloggers to muse about the “blowhards” and “locker-room culture” among Wikipedia editors.

That's around the time efforts picked up speed to get other, existing communities involved in writing Wikipedia entries. The GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) Wiki initiative began pairing experienced Wikipedia editors with cultural institutions in 2011, the same year L.A. artist-librarian Katie Herzog co-organized the first “Queering Wikipedia” edit-a-thon at the Tom of Finland Foundation Library in Echo Park. She scheduled it to correspond with a rash of “WIKIPEDIA LOVES LIBRARIES” events, subject-specific editing events happening in libraries across the country (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts hosted a Wikipedia! The Musical! edit-a-thon). Its agenda included updating the information on performance artist Bob Flanagan and Roller Derby Hall of Famer Ann Calvello.

More recently, curator and creative consultant Alexandra Thom set up residence at the Brooklyn Museum from January to October 2013, using the museum's collection to fill in gaps on Wikipedia. She wrote many entries on African art, as well as a number about the 1,038 women who had plates or floor tiles dedicated to them in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, a 1979 sculpture that gave “a place at the table” to women whose historical importance had been largely ignored.

Stacey Allan, executive editor at L.A. online publication *East of Borneo*, knew about the GLAM effort and Herzog's events when she decided to host the first #UnforgettingLA as part of East of Borneo's Summer Cooperative show at Culver City's Greene Exhibitions. The show, in July, included journals and small-press publications on shelves. Visitors could

trade their own lightly used publications during the show; on its last day, the shelves were flipped over and used as tables for an edit-a-thon that focused on building the Wikipedia presence of L.A.'s art history. A show-closing barbecue happened at the same time, and, of the 60 or so people who stopped by, about 10 got to work editing.

As they worked, a lot of conversation centered on what did and didn't already have entries. "There would be some surprise at what wasn't there," Allan says. For instance, only a handful of the artists included in the Hammer's "Now Dig This!" exhibit of black artists in L.A. had entries.

The second #UnforgettingLA event, held at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, focused on bolstering the presence of L.A.'s female architects, and some of the women whose names were on the to-do list came. Among them was Deborah Sussman, the designer who co-designed the landscape and graphic look of the 1984 Summer Olympics; she's currently the subject of a show at WUHO Gallery in Hollywood. By the end of the day, she had an entry.

"Suddenly, the page you built is No. 5 in the Google results," Allan says.

Artist Karen Adelman, who is co-facilitating the Feb. 9 event with Vladimir Gallegos, attended one of the MAK Center edit-a-thons, and felt invigorated by it. "I worry about the culture of oversharing that the Internet has cultivated, and yet also clamor constantly for more valid representations of diversity," she says. "I think an event like this one offers a dynamic solution: a real life, in-person gathering of actual people and their bodies."

The Los Angeles Art + Feminism Edit-a-Thon is Feb. 9, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., at 951 Chung King Road, Chinatown. Childcare is provided. The next #UnforgettingLA Edit-a-Thon takes place at MOCA Grand Avenue on March 9. Bring your own laptops.

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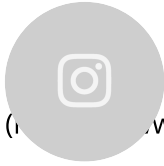
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